Tapping Hidden Potential: Working with Exemplars to Build a Performance Support System

A session at "The Technology of Performance Improvement: How We Get Results"

By
Richard B. Pearlstein, PhD
Public Health Institute/Population Leadership Program

Population Leadership Program

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Agenda for Session

Time	Content Topics	Participant Activities
15 min	1. The benefits of using exemplars to develop performance improvement interventions: Aligning management & HPT consultants on appropriate use of exemplars; how exemplars and consultants can work together well; how to guide exemplars in performance & task analyses that focus on key issues	Mini-lecture with Q&A built in Refer to job aid handouts
30 min	2. Demonstration of module on managing without micromanaging	Participants will take part in a portion of a module on managing without micromanaging, then discuss how the structure was derived from a systematic analysis using exemplars
10 min	3. How to apply learning from this session on the job	Participants will write the first two steps they will take to begin working with exemplars to develop performance support systems back on the job; the whole group will contribute to putting key ideas on flipcharts

Overview of Working with Exemplars
to Develop a Performance Support System

What's an exemplar?	An exemplar, sometimes called an "expert performer" or an "expert practitioner," is a concept "popularized" by Tom Gilbert. Exemplars are doing the job the way managers want it done. They are usually NOT subject matter experts (SMEs). That's because in most organizations, a SME is a supervisor or a specialist who is NOT currently doing the job. There are some instances, though, when managers call exemplars SMEs.
Why use exemplars?	Exemplars are in the best position to know what really works in the job in question. Once people are out of that job, they quickly get out of date on what is really happening there. And, because they no longer have to struggle with the realities of how to get things to work given current situations, they quickly lose touch with the best ways of coping with those realities.
How to select exemplars	Managers are in a good position for knowing who their exemplars are since they have to monitor their work and accept responsibility for outcomes. Table 1 on page 4 offers some tips for how to request exemplars from management when you are developing performance support systems.

Preparing and working with EPs to build a performance support system	In most situations, exemplars will not have worked on developing performance support systems in the ways suggested by a systematic performance improvement method such as HPT. So, helping them to understand the new approach is important for success. Table 2 on page 5 offers tips for preparing and working with exemplars.
	
	One of the most important things to do when working with exemplars is to determine the range of variables that underlie their expertise.
	
	Here's a good way to do this:
	
	1. Ask the exemplars to select their most usual problem situation
	    – They will usually identify this easily
	2. Find out what exemplars do first when dealing with that situation
	    – Determine possible criteria they use to make decisions on what and how they do this

Overview Continues on Next Page

3. Find out which criteria exemplars usually really use in the situation by examining critical incidents in detail
   – They probably don't use all they've listed
4. Then select other common problem situations
   – For each selected, repeat steps 2 & 3 above
   – The result will be a matrix showing the most common problems and the criteria that must be considered in addressing them
   – Table 3 on page 11 shows a portion of a matrix that resulted from working with exemplars to determine how CTOs (USAID project oversight officers) can manage without micromanaging in typical situations. The actual matrix included many more typical situations and corresponding case studies.
5. Once you have the criteria for the most common situations, work with the exemplars to determine the outcomes that result when the criteria are met in different ways. This will surface the underlying, tacit "rules" they use in making decisions
   – You will work through an example of applying a tacit rule during this session.
   – An example of an actual, formerly tacit rule in working with requests for information is to "Negotiate with the requester to reduce required completeness of response in order to shorter deadlines for response"
6. You can then build a series of cases based on your matrix, and then develop supporting resource materials that are based on the underlying tacit rules
7. Resource materials can be used in course modules and as separate job aids

Implementing a performance support system	When you implement a performance support system, apply the following tips:
	
	• First get top managers' buy-in, since they will need to introduce the new system and promote its use
	• Use the exemplars who helped build the system to help conduct training in the various modules
	   – They should serve as technical advisors during the course, while a separate facilitator conducts it
	   – After receiving training as coaches, the exemplars may also coach individuals using system materials

Table 1: Tips for How to Request Exemplars instead of SMEs

Do	Don't
1. Ask for exemplars, people who currently do the job well **Note**: In some organizations, exemplars may be called SMEs. It is easy to tell the difference, though: An exemplar is one who currently performs the job and is known for doing it well (achieving worthy accomplishments)	1. *Ask for "Subject Matter Experts" (SMEs)* *If you are offered a staff specialist or supervisor, ask if the individual is currently performing the job (see number 3 "don't" below)*
2. Influence who is selected **Note**: Because exemplars are important contributors to unit performance, managers may try to substitute others whose performance is not so exemplary. Help them understand the leverage that will result from using true exemplars	2. *Leave this to the client's judgment*
3. Ask for people who are performing as desired in the job for which performance improvement interventions are being designed	3. *Accept supervisors of employees in the target job, or staff experts on it or on the policies bearing on it*

Table 2: Tips for Preparing and Using Exemplars

Do	*Don't*
1. Tell exemplars what they will be doing ASAP after they've been selected	1. *Let them think about and prepare on the basis of their own assumptions*
2. Focus system development on achieving performance objectives	2. *Focus on what subject matter should be included*
3. Choose methodology to simulate job performance	3. *Choose methodology on the basis of client or exemplar preferences*
4. Provide exemplars with framework questions to help them articulate their expertise	4. *Let them select from their repertoire without an appropriate framework*
5. Focus exemplars on application problems that are important and/or occur frequently	5. *Let exemplars select practice problems without prioritization: Problems they find interesting are often peripheral*
6. Keep focus on skills application	6. *Let focus drift to subject matter*
7. Ask exemplars to apply procedures and rules to realistic problem simulations	7. *Assume that the stated rules and approaches are correct or complete*
8. Observe some exemplars performing on the job	8. *Rely entirely on what exemplars say they do*
9. Use exemplars to write "book answers" to application cases	9. *Let HPT professionals write book answers without exemplars' input*
10. After exemplars help prepare application cases, enlist them in developing resource materials necessary for achieving book answers	10. *Write resource materials first, or have resource materials address issues extraneous to cases*
11. Act to maintain the structures you adopt for working with exemplars	11. *Allow exemplars to stray from the agreed-upon structures, providing information that doesn't tightly focus on performance issues at hand*

Excerpt from Resource Materials for
Managing Without Micromanaging[*]

What is Micromanaging, and How Can a CTO Avoid It?

In general, "micromanaging" means that a person seeks undue detail, exercises excessive control, or gives disproportionate focus regarding some aspect of a task that someone else is performing. "Micro" is the key: the detail is minor, the control is unnecessary, or the focus is misplaced.

Note: A CTO or "Cognizant Technical Officer" is the USAID representative who provides technical oversight for a large-scale project, often run by a contractor called a cooperating agency or "CA." Sometimes the CA's project director is referred to as the CA.

CAs often complain that one of the most dysfunctional things a CTO can do is to micromanage a project. USAID management developed this training module specifically to help new CTOs avoid behavior that feels like micromanagement.

If you're a relatively inexperienced CTO, this module can guide you when you're considering how much to involve yourself in the work your CA is doing. Here's an overview of what to consider:

❍ Is the action clearly part of the agreement?

❍ Are you focusing on project outcomes or on project activities?

❍ Has the CA requested your involvement?

❍ Is your involvement appropriate?

Is the action clearly part of the agreement?

Every agreement with a CA specifies the actions and decisions that pertain to USAID; others remain with the CA. On USAID's behalf, for example, CTOs approve the annual workplan and budget. CTOs can't *change* the workplan, except with agreement of the CA's project director.

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[*] This module was prepared for me by R. John Howe and David Ferguson, who worked with USAID exemplars to develop it for use in a PHI/PLP-developed USAID program

An agreement may give the CTO authority to approve key personnel on a given project. The agreement will specify these positions. The CTO has no basis to insist on approving any other personnel within the CA's organization.

CTOs will ask CAs for updates, status reports, and similar information. As a CTO you have a right to ask the CA about expenditures related to a project's budget; you do *not* have the right to question the CA's internal budgeting.

For example, as part of your job, you'd review with the CA actual expenditures and compare them with the workplan, discussing what the relative proportions are and the reasons for any variation. This is both expected and appropriate; it's part of your managing the project.

You should *not* question how the CA allocates money internally. If the project allows a given sum for administrative support, that amount was approved, and the project is meeting its goals, then how the CA divides those administrative funds internally is outside your area of concern.

CTOs and key personnel

Agreements often include a provision that the CTO must approve staff for a few specific, key positions.

Often, both CTOs and CAs try to include the CTO in other staffing decisions. A CTO may feel that a non-key position is important enough for him to help in selection. Or the CA may send the CTO information on *all* candidates for a key post, even at the early stages of selection.

One experienced CTO said, "We don't *want* to see all the candidates. If it's a key person, we *would* want to see the CV of the final candidate before he or she is hired."

Selecting non-key personnel

One CA reportedly asked his CTO for permission to hire a particular person for a janitorial position. A CTO who wanted to avoid micromanagement might have replied, "I'm confident you can choose an acceptable person without my involvement. I'll be happy to review final candidates for any of the four key positions in this project."

USAID must approve any change in subcontractors, but as a CTO you cannot make commitments to subcontractors beyond the established workplan. From the CA's viewpoint, micromanagement can happen when a CTO seeks to get involved beyond the scope of the agreement.

Managing without micromanaging: a summary

This chart summarizes the key ideas in this section. When you're considering whether to act in a given situation, and whether your action might be micromanagement, start with the question in the upper left corner of the chart.

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┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐
│ Is the action│   No   │ Are you focusing │  Activities  │ Has the CA       │   No
│ clearly a part│──────▶│ on project       │─────────────▶│ requested        │───────┐
│ of the agreement?│    │ outcomes or      │              │ your involvement?│       │
└──────────────┘        │ on project       │              └──────────────────┘       │
       │                │ activities?      │                     │                   │
      Yes               └──────────────────┘                    Yes                  │
       │                     Outcomes                            │                   │
       │                        │              ┌─────────────────────────────────┐   │
       │                        │              │ Even at the CA's request,        │   │
       │                        │              │ your acting might not be a        │   │
       │                        │              │ wise choice.                      │   │
       │                        │              └─────────────────────────────────┘   │
       │                        │                             │                       │
       │                        ▼              ┌──────────────────────────────────┐   │
       │         ┌──────────────────────┐      │ Is your involvement appropriate?  │   │
       │         │ Take action.          │ Yes  │ • Will you strengthen your        │   │
       └────────▶│ There's little risk   │◀─────│   relationship with the CA?       │◀──┘
                 │ of appearing to       │      │ • Can you support the CA without  │
                 │ micromanage.          │      │   doing the CA's work?            │
                 └──────────────────────┘      │ • Can you act without neglecting  │
                                               │   other parts of your own job?    │
                                               └──────────────────────────────────┘
                                                              │
                                                             No
                                                              ▼
                                               ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                                               │ Your action could             │
                                               │ easily be seen as             │
                                               │ micromanagement.              │
                                               └──────────────────────────────┘
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Case 1: Hiring

Case 1, Task A

You are a relatively inexperienced CTO assigned to an ongoing cooperative agreement. During your first month on this assignment, you learn the CA wants to hire an evaluation specialist. They send her résumé to you for your approval before they make any offer. The position is not considered one of the project's five key staff positions.

Although monitoring and evaluation is not a major outcome for this project, you have a technical background in this area and are very interested in evaluation issues.

What, if anything, should you do regarding this planned hiring?

Book Answer for Case 1, Task A

Two different answers might apply to this situation.

   A. If you follow the general rule from the Resource reading, you would inform the CA that this isn't a hiring that you as the CTO need to approve. The agreement gives you approval over key positions, but this isn't one of them.

      Since the major outcomes for the project do not include monitoring and evaluation, you don't seem to have a compelling reason to involve yourself more than you would with any other issue in the project.

   B. It could be that the CA is looking to draw on your personal expertise, given your background in monitoring and evaluation. In other words, they're asking you for an opinion; they aren't asking you to make or approve the final selection. In these circumstances you could agree to give your opinion about the candidate for the evaluation specialist position.

One experienced CTO, talking about this kind of request, said: "The USAID world is a small one. People tend to know one another and sometimes have worked with one another previously. It's possible that this is a situation in which you might legitimately aid in this selection decision by asking someone else with knowledge of this candidate's work. It may well be that you could do this more readily than the CA could."

In other words, even if your own technical background isn't relevant, you may have contacts that the CA lacks. These contacts could provide some insight into the candidate's qualifications. Referring the CA to such contacts could be another way for you to assist the CA in making a sound selection.

Table 3: Managing Without Micromanaging
Matrix for First Three Practice Cases

Type of Micromanaging	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
CTO initiating action below the level at which he/she should be working.		CA concerned about the success of a conference. Has approved conference objectives and budget but is now concerned about participants and whether some important papers are properly assigned. Tempted to intervene about the latter.	
CA asks CTO to make some decision or to do some task that the CA should be doing him/herself.	CA request review/approval of non-key CA staff		
Mission is giving CA direction beyond that called for in the agreement			Survey project with objectives and protocol approved. CA says to missions asking for copies of the questionnaire to be used. Asks if CTO wants to review it too.

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Biography

, PhD

Rich develops and implements performance improvement interventions for USAID via the Population Leadership Program (PLP). He directs programs to develop some interventions by extracting tacit decision rules from exemplars. Before PLP, he managed training at the U.S. Senate, was Director of Training Performance Improvement for the American Red Cross, and consulted on performance improvement to major private and Federal organizations. He has been an ISPI director and has presented at 18 ISPI conferences.

Rich may be reached at PLP at 202-661-8023 or rpearlstein@popldr.org.